

If These Walls Could Talk by ceruleanstorm

Series: (something strange in your neighborhood) [1]

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Adoption, Blanket Forts, Brother-Sister Relationships, Budding Romances, Domestic Violence, F/M, Family fics, Nightmares, Past Abuse, character exploration, hopper trying to be a dad again, jonathan the photographer, joyce byers being the mom of the year, lonnie's an asshole, promise rings, will and eleven bonding, will and jonathan hanging out

Language: English

Characters: Dustin Henderson, Eleven, Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Mike Wheeler, Will Byers

Relationships: Eleven & Mike Wheeler, Eleven/Mike Wheeler, Joyce Byers & Jim "Chief" Hopper

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2017-06-14

Updated: 2017-08-12

Packaged: 2022-04-02 01:39:55

Rating: Teen And Up Audiences

Warnings: No Archive Warnings Apply

Chapters: 8

Words: 13,251

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

"Well they'd be like, shit is crazy right?"

Stories about how the Byers survived, even before there was Eleven, even before there was Hopper, and how they manage to keep surviving altogether in the same house with talking lights and talking walls.

1. He's Just Lucky It Wasn't His Face

Author's Note:

peeks out of my little anxiety hole.

so I guess i have some explaining to do. This past semester I got really really sick. I was in the hospital for about 6 weeks and only now am I ready to try this again. I'm trying to wade through a shallow pool, then I'll tackle the deep end.

While I was in the hospital though, i met some pretty amazing people from all different types of backgrounds, and their stories have inspired me to start writing my own again. This series will be inspired by different things people said to me in the last month.

I'll eventually get back to the mileven stuff, and there will be some of it in here, but a lot of it will exploring the Byers and Joyce's history. Also, I really wanted to jump on the Will/El bro-sis relationship bandwagon.

“He was just lucky it wasn’t his face.”

“Uh-huh, whatever you say Joyce.” Hopper said, pinching his nose and letting out a long drawn out sigh before handing Joyce a cold pack of melting ice cubes and damp paper towels. “I just hope it was worth it.” He muttered and landed with an *umph* next to her on the couch.

“I don’t get it. Dad was here and you just hit the wall?” Jonathan asked. Sitting next to him, Will slumped deeper in his seat, as if he was making his best attempt to disappear from the room. His face, so like Jonathan’s, wore the opposite expression, his eyebrows creased in shame and Jonathan’s brow furrowed and fists clenched in anger.

“This isn’t your fault, Will.” Eleven wanted to tell him, so very

desperately. He hadn't even been home when Lonnie showed up and Lonnie was long gone by the time Hopper, Jonathan and Will came running through the door, arms full of party supplies.

"That's pretty much what happened." Joyce admitted, her lips in a pout. "And it *was* worth it, Hop, so don't even start with that lecture. You would have straight up hit him and then we would have had a much bigger problem right now."

Hopper gave her a defeated shrug. "Joyce, you broke your hand—"

"I didn't *break* it!" insisted Joyce, with a shrill voice and glare at the police chief. Only then she pursed her lips together as she wrenched her injured hand from its ice pack pillow to silence a scream. A sudden look of concern washed over his tired face, and El gave him a soft smile.

Hopper shook his head at her, but still, he took Joyce's hand and placed it gently back in the ice pack. Eleven watched with the utmost attention, worried the bandage she had so meticulously wrapped around her surrogate mother's hand would unravel. Still holding her hand after his work was done, Hopper continued to gaze at her with the same soft look. This made Eleven sigh- far from contempt- she thought it was sweet whenever they had moment like this ("Well of course *you* think it's sweet," Dustin had teased her whenever Will brought up the possible *thing* between his mom and the chief, "Since you're always making googly eyes at a certain freckled *oomph*-" He was then stopped, conveniently, by a pillow. Where it came from, El couldn't say) and found herself appreciating how different it was than just fifteen minutes ago.

The yelling had started abruptly, and without warning, at a volume that sent Eleven panicking. She'd been keeping herself busy in Will's room, her focus on wrapping his birthday present. It was a long green scarf, Will's favorite color, made out of soft wool that she been fussing over ever since Flo had taught her how to knit a back in the fall. Then the leaves had fallen off the trees and the season had morphed into a snowy winter that kept Will shaking behind a locked front door.

"Why don't you ever come out with us?" Eleven asked him once,

having left the rest of the gang tossing *actual* snowballs at each other. It was something they found themselves doing more and more often, the four of them out in the snow in the Byers' or Wheeler's front yard, Dustin and Lucas yelling at the injustice of El being on Mike's team- but Will never followed.

"Oh it's just that," his eyes lit up in fear of being questioned and he buried himself further in the couch, "they still think I'm pretty vulnerable to the cold and my stomach hurts a little today and my head-"

"I understand." whispered Eleven, just loud enough for him to hear. If she didn't have the other boys with her and if she wasn't mesmerized by the pure white softness falling gently from the sky, then the freezing temperatures could become a quick reminder of the hell they had both lived. So she spent months on the scarf, hoping that if he wore it, he would feel brave enough to stop hiding behind the front door and that he would be brave enough to face his fears.

Then, as Eleven was finishing taping the sides of the wrapping paper, she heard Joyce start to scream. The present flew from her hands as she startled at the noise.

"Really, today of *all* days you just decide to show back up? Without a single word from you for, for *months, years* and you think I'm just going to let you come into my house?"

In all the months since she'd been living at the Byers, Joyce had never once screamed, and except for the times that involved Hopper, Joyce even yelling was rare. Eleven found the present where it had hit the carpet, picking it up in her arms as if to shield it.

"Just who the *hell* do you think you are?" screamed Joyce, and Eleven took a step back.

Then, another voice. Just as loud, it was a man. *Lonnie?* Eleven thought hard to remember Joyce's ex husband; she was lucky to have never been introduced, he was just a name whispered bitterly by Will and Jonathan on Easter Mornings and Christmas Eves and on Father's Day. It was more than easy to associate Lonnie as just as bad as the men who raised her. He was never there, he was never a part of the

memories they were making. He had done something bad to Joyce, to Jonathan, to Will, and that was more than enough to make Eleven angry.

“Jesus Joyce, do you always have to start this shit right at the start? I’m here for Will, just like you.”

El came to edge of the room, stopping to lean on the doorframe. Lonnie and Joyce must have been in the living room.

“Just like me? *Just like me?* Do you seriously- are you actually- how dare you, Lonnie! You’ve been here for Will, *just like me?* Where were you when he came home? When he came back? Where were you- *you bastard !*”

“ *You* kicked me out remember? You were the one insisting Will would be better off if I just went to hell, remember? On the same fucking day we buried him, so you can’t say I was never there!”

A wave of confusion washed over El. No, Joyce could say very easily that Lonnie was never there. She had what Mike had called evidence, which he insisted was a key part of the scientific process, if wanted to prove something. And the evidence was simple: Lonnie wasn’t ever there.

The confusion then bled into something more sinister. Panic. The way Lonnie spoke, the way he twisted the truth as if was meant to bend, as if it could break. It was all too familiar.

“*We can end this,*” her ghost whispered, a chill crawling up her spine and anxiety twisting her stomach. “ *So no one else gets hurt...*”

“Oh to hell with that, Lonnie!” Joyce shouted and El took another step into the hallway. “We didn’t ever bury the real Will and you know that! It’s not like you ever believed me! On anything! *Ever!* When I needed more than ever for someone to just *listen* to me, you came back to take advantage of my family, you *selfish bastard!* ”

“C’mon Joyce, even you have to admit, what you were saying because you sounded insane. You’re hysterical know and you were hysterical then.” Lonnie had stopped shouting, taking a different

approach to influence Joyce. Eleven knew that if he wasn't being hysterical like Joyce, he could say he was being the good guy.. What had Will said to her that one day when he was trying to help her draw... That bad guys could be smart too. "Talking lights and Will was the- the wall? I honestly did want you to get help I just-"

"Choose your next words very, *very* carefully, or they just might be last time you *ever* step foot in this house."

Or maybe not that smart after all , Eleven thought to herself with a small smile .

El had moved all the way out of the hallway and finally had the whole view of the fight. The front door was still wide open, bits of snow tumbling in with wind every couple of seconds. Joyce stood at her full height (which was not very much) and faced her ex head on. She looked unmovable in that moment, like if Lonnie did ever come any closer, she wouldn't hesitate. El wondered if she looked that brave facing monsters, Russians, and Bad Men. She swallowed. Clutching the present El watched Joyce, both of them waiting for Lonnie's next, and probably stupid, move.

"Mouthbreather." whispered Eleven for only herself to hear, missing part of Lonnie yelled next.

"-and you're now on top of all this shit you're exposing my sons to this circus freak! Dammit, just, babe, have a heart, okay?" His voice softened. "I just want to surprise my boy this year. He's now what, twelve? Jesus, Joyce, how long are you planning to keep my own son from me?"

Now *that* was the wrong move, and El felt the familiar tingle of anger in her hands. She stole a quick look around the corner, checking to see if there was anything she could throw at Lonnie's big head.

"He's *fourteen*, you dumbass, and as long as I have to, I'll keep him away from you- I'll keep them *all* away from you, so none of them ever have to know the pain that you bring! Never again, Lonnie! Hell, if you want a fight, we can take this back to court if you want me to so *damn* badly." Joyce voice suddenly dropped, but she moved forward, her fists still clenched.

El watched as something in Lonnie's face changed at Joyce's threat, and decided, much to her chagrin, to slowly drop the lamp she concentrating so hard on.

"*Get. Out.*" Joyce then hissed. Putting his hands up in a false surrender, Lonnie backed up toward the door, but his ex wife wasn't finished with him just yet. "Get the *hell* out of my house!" she shrieked at the top of her lungs.

"You're gonna pay for this, you *bitch*, you'll pay for this!" screamed Lonnie through the open doorway. Then he was marching out into the snow, eyes still bloody and strained, straight up until the door slammed with a loud *bang!* and Joyce was left standing in the wreckage.

"You- you jackass- manipulative, *abusive* son of a bitch, bastard-" Joyce was screaming, her hands in her hair as she swung around in anger in frustration. Then, before El could move forward, Joyce swung her clenched fist into the wallpaper. She cried out in pain, and cursed some more.

"Joyce!" El whispered. Slowly, she emerged from the dark shadow of the hallway.

Joyce's brow furrowed, her blurry vision finding the small thirteen year old, toes curled in the carpet at the edge of the living room. "Eleven? What- what do you have in your arms?"

"My present to Will." Again, El spoke in a voice hardly above a whisper.

"Oh," a pained smile washed over Joyce's face. She gestured with her good hand. "You can put it on the kitchen table with the others."

But El remained steadfast where she was. Joyce was still cradling the hand she'd hit the wall with, her expression mixed with both anger and pain. She took a couple of deep breaths, stumbling back onto the couch, her head knocking the wall behind the piece of furniture. "Dammit."

"You hurt your hand." El took a deep breath and voiced.

“Oh, I did, it’s okay honey, I’m- I’m fine, I will, I’ll be fine.” Joyce tried to assure her, but the way she winced again and the way her voice shook had El still staring at her in disbelief.

“You were fighting with Lonnie.” El came a little bit closer. “You hit the wall.”

Joyce let out a pained laugh. “He’s just lucky it wasn’t his face. Sweetie, I’m okay, you can just go get ready for the-” she stopped mid breath, hissing and cursing, still cradling her hand. Not before dropping the present she had a stressed and fretted over for half an hour, Eleven crossed the threshold of living to where Joyce stood and took a long look at her hand.

It was starting to swell. “Did you- Did you break it?” asked El, her stomach turning and her palms sweaty. Mike had broken his wrist right before the school year (he said he had only fallen after coming home from school, but Eleven was convinced he’d been pushed and just wanted to shield her from the truth, and maybe shield somebody else from getting a chair telepathically thrown at their head). She remembered his wrist and hand all swollen and red, and his face almost a shade of green under puffy crying eyes when Dustin and Lucas had dragged him through the Wheeler’s front door. El had been braiding Holly’s hair, taking a break from making cookies with Mrs. Wheeler, but all that was put behind them once the boys marched in with Mike. Mrs. Wheeler turned off the oven, grabbed her purse, and rounded everybody into the car. They had pulled familiar parking lot of the ER, El holding Mike’s unbroken hand a little harder than was probably warranted, but he smiled through the pain in both hands and promised her he would be find if El didn’t want to follow them into the hospital for fear of triggering a flashback. But El wanted to follow, she wanted to brave because he was being brave. So her past, it was just the past, in that moment. Dustin, Lucas, and her weren’t allowed to come into the X-Ray room, rather tasked with the job of entertaining the youngest Wheeler and making sure she didn’t run off. She remembered how Mike had showed them the copy of the X-Ray he was given by the doctor anyways. Able to infer that the bone that was *supposed* to be connected to the bones in his hand was the one he “fell” on, as it was twisted away from his hand at an awkward and painful angle. The trip ended better than it had began, Mike had

a cast put on and everyone was able to sign it (Dustin and Lucas drew pictures of Chewbacca and Yoda and gave her “the look” when she drew a heart by her own name), and before dropping them off, Mrs. Wheeler got everyone ice cream.

Taking a deep breath, Joyce tilted her head at her hand. “It doesn’t look broken. Honey, I think it will just bruise.”

“If you had hit Lonnie instead would that have broken it?” Eleven asked , eyes full of sincere worry and curiosity. “Broken, Joyce, it’s all swollen and red like it’s broken.”

“I hope it would broken his *dumb face* . Maybe you’re right honey, there are hundreds of little bones in the hand it, I could have shattered any one of them.” admitted Joyce, taking a deep breath.

This gave El an idea. After making sure Joyce was sitting on the couch and was *not* moving no matter how much she protested, El went through all three bedrooms, the kitchen, the mudroom, in search of the first aid kit. She found it wide open under Jonathan’s bed (to herself she wondered if this meant he, Nancy, and Steve were out hunting monsters again) and brought her proud production back into the living room.

“Oh, first aid, sweetheart, I’m *fine* -” Joyce began to protest but Eleven plopped herself on the couch next to her.

Taking her possibly broken hand out of her grasp, Eleven simply shook her head. “No. You’re not. I can help you.”

Lucas had taught her a little bit about first aid when she had first come back to them. Although Lucas referred to himself as “a self certified expert.” Dustin always counter backed saying he was just a “self certified dumbass” but El had learned a thing or two. After the incident with Mike’s wrist, El went back to Lucas, asking him to show her more, Now, with tender hands, El lifted a light wooden plank from the first aid kit, and started to place it on Joyce’s swollen hand.

“Well, well, well.” laughed Joyce through a genuine smile. “Where did we learn this?”

Eleven gave her a shrug, still focused on her work. "Lucas taught me first aid." Satisfied with where the small plank was centered, El dug up the bandages (all unraveled and choppy; what were Jonathan and Nancy even up to?) and taped a soft end the wooden edge.

"Oh, that's nice of him. You haven't had to use it a lot, have you?" El could sense the worry that had entered Joyce's voice. She tried not focus on the guilt it brought her as she continued wrapping the bandage around the plank.

"Bikes." El explained, and Joyce nodded. "We fall off them a lot. We all get lots of scrapes and bruises. I wanted to know how to help." Purposefully leaving out the part about learning for Mike, El continued with her work, and refused to make eye contact as the heat on her face told her she was most likely blushing.

"You must be an expert, then." Again El just shrugged, but she was happy the smile had come back to Joyce's face. Her happy state, even with the pain in her hand, relaxed El. such a contradiction to furious state of mind that had Joyce screaming and punching walls less than five minutes ago. As El finished taping up Joyce's now set wrist, the front door flew open in a flurry.

"We're home!" shouted an ecstatic Will, followed by Jonathan and Hopper, shaking the snow out of their hair. "Hey Mom! Oh, hey El-wait-" Will paused when he saw the scene before him on the couch. Behind him, Hopper came up, his brow furrowed in worry. "What happened here?"

"Yes, Joyce..." trailed Hopper. "What did happen?"

Right as Joyce opened her mouth to explain, Eleven beat her to the punch, or her punch. "Joyce punched the wall."

"She did what?!"

-

"Jesus, Mom, what is it with you and walls?" Jonathan asked, settling back into the couch after Joyce finished explaining.

A sigh from Joyce, then "He's just lucky-"

"It wasn't his face." The boys finished for her. El was busy putting the first aid kit back in order, sending looks of suspicion Jonathan's way every few minutes.

"Let me take you to the doctor, Joyce." begged Hopper, again. "I seriously believe that your hand is broken."

"So what if it is? *If* it is broken, it's one of these small bones connected to my fingers and a doctor can't do anything about that! Hop, that means no x-ray or cast or-"

"Okay, fine." Hopper let out a long sigh. Then, a confused look overcame his face. "How do you know that Joyce?"

"What, you think this is the first time I've almost broken my hand after hitting the wall because of Lonnie and his stupid face?" This, and side eye she gave him, made Hopper relax and laugh just a little. "Besides," continued Joyce. "El helped me just fine." She took her hand out of her ice pack to brandish the bandage and plank El had set, "This is pretty much what they would have done at the doctor's office..."

Hopper threw up his hands in defeat. "Okay, fine! If you think you're fine, then I'll stubbornly agree."

"Thanks Hop." Joyce smiled up at him, patting his hand with her good one. Then they were trapped in that moment again, staring at each other like they were the only ones in the room, like time had stopped just to give them this peace, this hint what the other felt, El tried her best to stop her thoughts from wandering, she was sure a red blush was crawling up her neck, wondering if she looked the same way at-

"So what did Lonnie want?" Hopper coughed, and then asked, successfully shattering the moment.

Joyce flung her good hand up in the air. "I don't even know, Jim. He just showed up here from hell knows where and tried to play his mind games with me."

"But why did he even come?" asked Jonathan. The looks of anger

hadn't softened in his face, and El noticed Will slide even further into the couch. She caught Joyce's eye, then looked at Will, and nodded at her surrogate mother.

"What do you think? All that son of bitch wanted from me was more money." Joyce was lying through her teeth, but when Will straightened up a little bit, she breathed a sigh of relief.

"He said 'You'll pay for this,'" El said, her voice quiet. She wasn't quite sure if it was the right time to reveal that detail, but it had scared her. Was Lonnie coming back? Was he going to something really dangerous to Joyce or to Jonathan or to Will this time?

"He- he, uh, he did say that." muttered Joyce. All eyes were on her. "But I think it was an empty threat. You know where that dumb jerk probably is right now? He's probably at some bar totally wasted." She glanced down at her hand. "But none of that matters!" She stood up, crossing the living room to where Will sat on the couch and kissed his head. "Because we have a party to throw!"

-

Joyce never did go to the hospital, even though Hopper asked four more times. Despite his ominous threat, Lonnie had yet to return, and Will's party was completely free of any mention of his stupid face. Mike, Dustin, and Lucas, followed also by Steve, Nancy, and a huge load of presents, all being carried by a very stubborn Steve.

"Do you need any help?" Nancy called after him.

"I told you! I can do this is one trip!" Steve called back as he proceeded to slip over one of the kitchen tiles.

"He offered to carry em." Lucas looked around the room and explained.

Just as Eleven was putting her present on the table (when she had dropped it, the paper had ripped, so with a sigh and a lot of tape, El carefully put it back together) she felt a tap on her shoulder. It was Will, standing there with a toothy smile, a nice change from the sadness that had haunted him earlier. Right as she opened her to

Speak, he was enveloping her in a hug. Eleven startled in his embrace, but returned it because even though she had grown up without ever being hugged, she was starting to really like them.

"Thank you for taking care of my mom," he whispered. "I know Lonnie was here because it was my birthday, he's done dumb stuff like that before."

Will stepped back and El gave him a smile. Across the room she spotted Mike in a heated conversation, who then caught her eye and smiled himself. "No problem, Will. Oh, and by the way, I was *this* close to throwing a lamp at Lonnie's head. But your mom kicked him out before I could."

"Ah man," Will laughed and El tried to wink at Mike, but she had yet to learn how to wink right and couldn't do it with just one eye, so she ended just blinking quickly at him. He burst into silent laughter, knowing exactly what she was *trying* to do, and El rolled her eyes. Will was still laughing. "That would of been the best birthday present ever!"

In the end, the bike Nancy, Steve, and Jonathan all chipped in and bought for Will, turned out to be the best birthday present ever. Will still loved the presents from the other boys and he loved the scarf, surprised it had been made by hand. Ek watched the party in silence, smiling at everyone who looked her in worry. Her mind was still ruminating on one thing Lonnie had spewed in his rage at Joyce.

"You're now on top of all this shit you're exposing my sons to this circus freak!"

"Hey," a familiar voice said behind her, breaking the spell of Lonnie's words. Mike was standing next to her, holding two red cups.

"Hey," she smiled, a little breathless, and took the cup from him.

"It's punch, I didn't really know what you wanted," he told her with a gesture to the cup. "That was pretty cool, what you made for Will."

El's eyes lit up. Butterflies erupted in her stomach and she prayed she wasn't blushing. "You think so?"

“Yeah.” It was his turn to light up, and to rub his neck trying to hide his own blush. “I didn’t even know you could knit.”

“I-” El began, but was interrupted by Joyce emerging from the kitchen carrying one half of a misshapen cake, all lit up with fourteen candles, yelling “Who wants cake?” Hopper held the other half as Joyce still had her possibly broken hand tucked under her other arm. El’s hand found Mike’s, and the room erupted into a chorus of “Happy Birthday.”

Standing there, watching Joyce’s face glowing in the candle light as she and Hopper passed off the cake to where Will was sitting, Eleven realized something. As Joyce leaned over and hugged Will with her good arm, it occurred to El that even with her small height, anxiety, bad cooking and all, El desperately wanted to be like Joyce one day. There was a type of bravery that radiated off the woman, no matter which abusive man that day who decided to pull their usual bullshit on her. El wanted to be brave enough to call out her own monsters and to continue to be strong, to be loving, to be kind even after all of those who had tried so hard to make her cruel. And if Joyce could manage it, then so could she,

Mike looked over at her and squeezed her hand. She squeezed back as Will blew out the candles and everyone’s clapping became deafening.

So maybe, she was a circus freak. But if she was, she was going to one hell of a brave one.

“Though she be but little, she is fierce”- William Shakespeare

2. He's a Jekyll and Hyde

Summary for the Chapter:

She's put up with Lonnie's abusive bullshit for years, and now Brenner thinks he can play the same card?

Notes for the Chapter:

okay so I know this doesn't really go into the mileven category, but I love Joyce's character so much and that scene where she tells him to go to hell. hopefully we won't have to see much Lonnie in the upcoming chapters. there'll be mileven soon enough, and I'm also working on a story just for them.

thank you so much reading. tw: domestic violence and emotional abuse

1983

Just because he had done it once before and it had worked, didn't mean it was going to work now. Still, she trusts Hopper, and even if she looks at his hedge clippers and her first thought is "*we're fucked.*" (A couple days with Hopper was altering her vocabulary.) she's still willing to follow him.

Because if this worked last time (supposedly), who was she to get in his way? They crawl through his carved hole in the fence, Joyce having a much easier time than Hopper, and begin to make their way towards what looks like a shadowed door. And that's when the lights came.

Dammit, Hop .

-

1971

She was running late, and panicking for a million different reasons. She could feel the weight of the positive pregnancy test at the bottom

of her purse, tears forming at her eyes,

Dammit, dammit, dammit, dammit! she thought to herself, running on the frozen sidewalk and sliding into the door of her car. Fumbling for her keys, she cursed again, dropping them in the snow..

No, no, no, no. Her thoughts raced to every bad possible scenario they could think- his face, his voice, his hands. Joyce flinched, finally finding the keys in the snow. Her eyes had just adjusted to the dark, and she tried to get her breathing under control. She couldn't drive if she was having a panic attack, especially in this weather, and she still had to pick up Jonathan from his grandmother's house.

Instead of picturing the her boyfriend's anger, she closed her eyes and pictured her son. He was only four years old, but he had become the light of Joyce's life, the reason she did everything, the reason she continued to be with Lonnie after his mother begged her, almost on her knees, to leave him. The reason she stayed after Lonnie threaten to put his hands her. Jonathan needed a father in his life; Joyce had known a life without one and she wasn't putting her child- now children- through the same pain.

She let herself wonder if Jonathan would like being an older brother. He'd probably be elated- someone to finally play with, someone who would make him happy in this terrible situation. And Lonnie? Well, maybe this would fix the two of them.

-

1983

Will is close, Joyce knows it.

Armed men jab her and Hopper with guns towards the entrance of the facility and that's when they're separated.

They stop abruptly in the dark hallway, and a balding man gestures to one of the guards. "You take the woman, we'll deal with this one."

Joyce catches the look of anger in Hopper's eye and swallows. "Why don't you just do whatever sick thing you're gonna do to us together. Save some of your precious time?" he growls. As he speaks, the

empty hallway echoes with the sound of high heels, and a blonde woman appears behind Hopper. She looks almost sinister.

“Because,” the woman pats Hopper’s shoulder and he jumps, “fortunately for her, this is her first time breaking in. Now you, you won’t be so lucky. I thought we asked nicely last time that you *not* return.”

The guards take this as their signal and jerk Joyce away from Hopper with a show of force. Joyce sends one last look of panic Hopper’s way, but he only gives her a calm nod, and she is left with no choice but to trust him.

At that they’re torn apart, forced down separate directions down the cold hallway, the woman’s heels still echoing. Joyce is pushed into a small room, forced into a lonely chair at a lonely table. She hears the click of handcuffs and the cold metal on her skin, and understands, these people have no intention of letting her go without the information they want.

Right now, the only thing that keeps Joyce from giving into her anxiety attack is the thought of Will. *He’s still out there.* Eleven had proved that. *He’s in that place, but he’s so close I can feel him. I’m coming Will, please hang on.*

I’m coming.

-

1974

Lonnie was an angry drunk, angrier than any man Joyce had ever meant. Scratch that, he became a monster, the complete opposite of the gentle man she thought he was when they met. He’s out of work again, and Joyce swallows her anger at this. It’s her fault, it really is. If she was more supportive of her husband he would go out and get a job, just like he had promised. Except that there’s another part of her where her anger burns strong; these 40 hour weeks on top of overtime have her exhausted and they’re stealing her from the only bright things in her world, her two beautiful sons. She doesn’t get to watch her babies grow up because Lonnie isn’t working, because

Lonnie doesn't care.

When he stumbles through the door one night, way past midnight, Joyce has had a nice evening until then. She got to eat dinner with her boys, color with Will, and read with Jonathan. With Lonnie's constrictive presence out of the house, Joyce tucked her boys in bed with her and they fell gently into sleep. Lonnie cursed as he came in, screaming the words that has Joyce covering Will's ears. Jonathan's face fell at the sound of his dad. She wanted to stay there, and assure them they were safe, she was here, she wouldn't ever let anything hurt them.

But Joyce had to face Lonnie. She climbed out of the bed, the boys giving her nervous looks. "It'll be alright." She kissed their forehead over the sound of their father shouting for her.

Joyce braced herself. Lonnie had only ever hit her once because Joyce had done something stupid. She'd locked the door one night out of a simple habit, but Lonnie thought she was kicking him out. He's yelling had quickly escalated and before she knew what was happening, he struck her across the face. Joyce fell to the floor in a stunned silence, a blooming bruise on her cheek and no oxygen left in her lungs. The change in Lonnie was almost instantaneous; he broke down in tears and fell to the floor.

"Joyce, Joyce, Joyce, I'm so sorry, I didn't mean I swear," he rambled, trying to take Joyce into his arms. "I didn't mean it, I swear. It will never happen again, I swear, please, I love you so much, I need you."

But Joyce had no words. She just kept thinking about how stupid she was to have locked the door.

Eventually, Lonnie stumbled in a drunk stupor and passed out on the couch. Tiptoeing, Joyce got up from her place in the carpet and went into the bathroom. In the fluorescent light, she gently touched the bruise that had consumed her left cheek. This was her own stupid fault.

As she came back into her bedroom, she heard the soft breathing of her sons, and her anxiety dissipated into the cold night air.

"Mommy?" Will sat up in the bed. Even in the dark she could see his concerned expression. But she just climbed back into the bed, enveloping Will in hug and burying them both in the covers. Will snuggled his little head into the crook of her neck, and in that moment Joyce considered just how far she would go for her children.

Lonnie was never going to touch her like that again.

-

1983

She's been screaming for at least 45 minutes. Another 45 minutes Will has to wait in that place. "Let me out of here!" she shouts, again. Again, no answer. "Somebody, please!" Joyce is handcuffed to a chair in cold metallic room with a mirror on the side wall. There should be someone behind that wall, listening, keeping her waiting.

"Let me out!" Joyce yells again, and this time she is answered by the sound of the door unlocking. A single man comes into the room, dressed in a nice suit and tie, putting on the act of a gentleman. A familiar shiver runs down Joyce's back. After years of emotional abuse from her ex-husband, she's learned the looks, the body language, the manipulations of an abuser. Lonnie had been a Jekyll and Hide, his mother once told Joyce. One minute he was calm, the next he was a monster. Joyce watched him pace, the familiar feeling growing stronger, along with bubbling anger.

After all, she had a very good reason to be holding a grudge.

He gets right to the point. "Your son," he looks at her and pauses, then "we know you've been in contact with him. She tries to ask one more time, but she can't get the words out in her shaking voice.

"When?" the man demands. "And how did you make contact with him?"

Joyce is lost. How did- how did they know? Did they know about the christmas lights or the bathtub or the incident with the wall?

He then lists a number that Joyce feels has no importance to this conversation whatsoever. So six people are missing? Will's not the

only one? What? As he speaks he takes his jacket off, deciding to get comfortable. Joyce is waiting for the switch between the man and the monster.

“This thing that took your son, we don’t really understand it. But, it’s behavior is predictable, like all animals,” he takes a seat, “it eats. It will take more sons, more daughters...”

At this point, Joyce is about three seconds away from calling bullshit. He’s certainly more clean and less drunk than Lonnie ever was, but this is how it always started. Calm, calculated, *sympathetic*. Joyce was buying none of it.

“I want to save them,” the man looked her in the eyes. “I want to save your son.” She looks at him, face incredulous, and if she hadn’t been handcuffed to the chair, she would’ve stood up and slapped that arrogant look off his face.

All Joyce could think of at that moment is Terry Ives, catatonic in a rocking chair, her baby’s nursery still intact. The baby he had stolen, and now, he had stolen Will. *I want to save them*, he says.

I want to be with the boys, with you, Joyce, babe, please just give me one more chance!

Fine you bitch, take the boys, I don’t even care. I never, ever cared!

Something is wrong with you Joyce, you need to see someone. No one is ever gonna believe you again if you keep running this “he’s in the lights” shit. You sound insane, babe. I’m just here to help.

Joyce had burned too many times by this shit. She put up with that son of bitch’s excuses and manipulations for seven years, *seven years*, and now this man thinks he can just walk in here and play the same damn game, just on a different board?

“But I can’t do that,” he continues. “Not without your help.”

I’m so sorry, babe, please I swear, I won’t do it again.

Don’t do this Joyce. Don’t do this to our family!

With that money he can go to whatever damn college he wants!

“Stop.” Joyce growls, sick of him twisting her arm like this, “I know who you are, I know what you’ve done. *You* took my boy away from me! You left him in that *place* to die! You faked his death... we had a funeral. We *buried* him. And *now* you’re asking for my help?”

In the back of Joyce’s mind, she remembers how many times she said her next words to Lonnie.

“Go to hell.” she spits. He will be getting nothing from her, and he knows it. His dark sunken eyes seem to cloud over as he lifts his chi, grinding his teeth.

Ah ha, Joyce thinks, *There’s the monster.*

-

It feels like an eternity from her interrogation to finally, *finally* pulling Will out of that horrid hell. He’s breathing, thanks to Hopper, who carries her limp boy as they run towards the way out of this nightmare. Joyce holds his hand, having torn off the glove to her hazmat suit, and it’s so cold. They break through to other side, and it’s all a blur of confusion as Hopper demands the lab’s scientists snap out of their shock and call a damn ambulance. There’s the ambulance, there’s Hopper guiding her along, but all she knows is her cold son’s hand.

He’s alive, she thinks, quick to blink away tears, *my baby is alive.*

Once he’s stable in the hospital, and his hands are warm again, Joyce lets herself relax, but only a inch. He’s still yet to wake up.

Some nurse lets her and Jonathan know Will has visitors waiting from him in the hospital.

That girl, Joyce thinks to herself, *she’s the reason my baby boy made it.* Her mind wanders back to the man who interrogated her. Dr. Martin Brenner, manipulating and abusing that poor girl. Keeping her head shaved, keeping her locked up in a laboratory, keeping her less than human. He was her Jekyll and Hide. Joyce and that poor little girl had that in common, abusive men who thought themselves entitled to

whatever they wanted.

Joyce looked forward to seeing her again, and to thank her once again.

“ i’m not interested in being easy on the eyes

i want them to flinch, think twice before they reach out their callous hands to bruise.

i want to be a constant reminder to men that not everything is theirs for the taking”

Notes for the Chapter:

recovery is a mess.

I hope my characterization was okay; abuse isn't an easy topic to discuss. I don't see Lonnie physically abusing Joyce as much as just emotionally manipulating and abusing her until she'd had enough. But sometimes it happens

Domestic Abuse Hotline: 1-800-799-7233

3. "that's my two cents for the day"

Summary for the Chapter:

Christmas is different for Hopper now.

Notes for the Chapter:

yes i know it's know where near the holidays but it's a 103 freaking degrees here in texas so please just indulge me.

Until Sarah, Hopper never really enjoyed the holidays. He understood the festivities of giving and receiving presents, the annoying overplayed music, the glowing lights and the story of the birth of Jesus, but he never felt obligated to participate. He'd walked out of his house at seventeen and had spent every Christmas by himself until a few years ago. Then Sarah came, and with Sarah everything changed. Everything was brighter, every new day had hope in it. Sarah illuminated all that was good about the world around him, and shadowed all the bad. Hopper wanted his little girl to experience everything he hadn't as a child, and that included Christmas.

He'd had that weekend off, deciding to celebrate by taking Sarah all the way from their cozy home in the big city to his hometown. Hawkins wasn't anything too special, but every year near Christmas, in the center of the town, the pond froze over. People brought their ice skates and little shake sold hot chocolate and coffee. Sarah was memorized by the snow falling around her, laughter mimicking Christmas bells as little snowflakes fell around her, the smile on her face glowing as they skated past the large tree in the center of the pond. With a giggle, she stumbled and fell hard back onto the ice. Hopper began to panic as Sarah's giggles turned into inconsolable tears. His wife skated up to them, frantically asking if her baby was okay.

“Hey sweetie,” he caught her attention, her little fists balled up. “How about some hot chocolate?” His daughter’s face perked up and she sniffled. Hopper bent down to pick her up off the ice and out of the way of the other skaters, trodding back to the small little white shack a few feet from the pond. He handed Sarah a few dollars, then waited as she and her mother took a place in line. But Sarah turned around quickly, running back to him, the tears having returned. “The man said we don’t have enough for all of us.” she explained through sniffles, “we need two more cents.” she told him, pronouncing cents and “cens.”

“Two cents, huh?” Hopper gave her a smile, wiping her tears with a gloved hand. “I think we can cough that up.” He reached back into his pocket, handing Sarah two pennies. Her laughter echoing through the air, his little girl ran back to her mother at the shop, delivering the promised change.

“That’s my girl.” Hopper whispered to himself, his breath clouding around him.

But after Sarah, Christmas changed again. He and his wife couldn’t look at each other as they signed the divorce papers that Christmas Eve. Everything was dull, and lifeless, and cold. All the happiness around him seemed fabricated to constantly remind him of his loss. And every year after, he carried two extra cents in his pocket, hoping, *praying* , it might fill the aching emptiness inside his chest.

-

All these years later, the holiday had changed again. For a flickering moment, it was taking Christmas lights *down* instead of up and stealing food from his staff holiday party, passing it off as hoarding it for himself. Now, it was the bundle of jackets and hats waddling in

front of him, trying to balance on her skates, and question after question about the frozen world around her.

“Why this? Why that? What are they doing? Who are they? Can we do that?”

“You know what, Eleven, I might not be the best person to ask all these questions,” Hopper smirked, trodding in the snow up with her to the hot chocolate shack.

The young girl nodded. “I know. Joyce says you’re a grinch.” Hopper tries to sputter out an excuse, but it’s turned into a scowl when she simply says “I’ll ask Mike instead.”

They reach the shack, and Eleven watches the snow fall around her until it’s their turn to pay. She hands the money over only to be met with a “You’re short, kid. Sorry. You got an extra two cents?”

Her face falls and suddenly Hopper’s pocket weighs a thousand pounds. He had done it again this year, slipped the pennies in without even thinking about it, a silent tribute to the next Christmas Sarah would be missing.

Hopper put his hand on her shoulder, digging out the pennies. “Well look what I got here.”

Eleven’s laughter sounds like Christmas bells, and Hopper doesn’t feel as empty when she takes his gloved hand in her own.

"You have to find the place that brings out the human in you. The soul in you. The love in you."
R.M Drake

4. "you're the shit"

Summary for the Chapter:

Hopper explodes when Mike gives El a promise ring.

Notes for the Chapter:

when I was in the hospital there was this woman who'd always says "You're the shit" as a compliment to people. She was awesome.

"Hop, I still don't understand why you're so upset. Just try and take a deep breath, okay?" Joyce rests her hand on his, letting out a sigh. "It's not like it's an engagement ring."

Hopper's nostrils flare at the mention of it. "This still crosses a line, Joyce, and she needs to know it. I'm going to talk her-"

"Oh, you're not going to make her take it off, are you?" Joyce grabs his arm and pulls him back to the kitchen table. "It's a harmless piece of jewelry. Besides, I haven't seen her this happy in a really long time. Well, up until you decided to yell at her."

"I- I shouldn't of yelled, I was wrong to do that, okay?"

"Oh?" Joyce face perks up in a smile, "are you admitting you have faults now ,Jim?"

"Maybe. But I *still* don't see why we're gonna let them get away with this. Neither of them are ready for it, they're just too young."

"Hopper," Joyce sighs again, "It's a *promise* ring. They've been dating for over a year now, he gets her jewelry all the time."

"Yeah the necklaces and bracelets, that's all fine, but it's a *ring*, Joyce! And she came in wearing it on her left hand! A promise ring, doesn't that mean they commit to the relationship forever?"

Shaking her head, Joyce rubs the back of Hopper's neck. "No, no. I mean, usually, I think it's something like that, Will told me the word

promise has some special meaning to the two of them. I'm not really sure what it is, but it isn't what you're thinking." As for walking into the house wearing the small silver band on her left hand, that made Joyce raise her eyebrow. El brushed it off as a mistake, that she simply didn't *know* that was the tradition for *engagement* rings. Joyce knew that Mike and El were smarter than committing to a marriage while they were still in high school, but she had a clear memory of explaining the tradition to El when she married Hopper a year later.

"She's only sixteen, Joyce. She shouldn't be committing to anything! Especially not a boy!" Hopper was clenching his fists now, his head turned from Joyce. She tries to touch him, but he just distances himself further from her.

"I thought you liked Mike."

"Yeah, yeah," Hopper shrugged it off. "Wheeler's a good kid, I just didn't think he was this dumb. You don't think he's pressuring her into anything or-"

"No, Hop-" Joyce attempts to stop him, but he was already so upset and on a roll. She just had to let him work through it.

"I trusted that kid that he wouldn't do anything to her or do something as dumb as misleading her and this counts as something Joyce, and if he tries to pull *anything* else I can personally arrange his funeral because Sarah is not going to-" He stops mid sentence, face flushed red and out of breath. The air between them was humid, the silence hanging in the heat. Joyce heard Hop swallow. Quickly he turned his face from her, wiping a tear she'd already seen.

"I-I" he stutters, eyes wide in shock, "I haven't had slip like that in *years*. "

"Oh, Jim," Joyce's voice cracks and she swallows, blinking away hot tears of her own. "Is *that* what this is really about?"

Silence, then-"Watching her grow up is so *hard* , Joyce. It's like the older she gets the closer I am to losing her. She only has two years left for school, and then she'll move out for college, and you and I both know that promise ring isn't going to stay a *promise* ring." Tears

were flowing down his red cheeks and slowly he let his head fall into his hands. "I just don't know if I can lose another daughter."

Something in Joyce broke. El hadn't been Sarah's replacement, but to Hopper she was a second chance. A chance to be better, to be there more often, to be the father El never had. But deep down his heart still ached at the remembrance of Sarah, at what he *couldn't* do and what he *couldn't* stop. Joyce wrapped Hopper up in a hug, which was awkward as she was so much smaller than him. But Hopper's sobs quieted, and Joyce lays her head gently on his shoulder.

"Jim," she whispers, "Jim, it's okay. It's going to be okay. Yes she's growing up but, but that doesn't mean you're going to lose her. No, no, please, please don't think that."

"I guess I've been preparing myself for this day, I just didn't expect it'd be so soon." sighs Hopper.

Joyce flat out whacks his shoulder for that. "Now listen to me, Hop, El looks up to you more than you know and loves you more than you think, a *no* ring from Mike is gonna change the fact that we'll always be there for her if she needs us. And when she leaves us, she'll always come back. It's what she's good at."

Hop sniffs, but Joyce catches a glimpse of him smiling, if not laughing just a little. "You know you're a lot better at this than me, Joyce." With a real smile, he bumps her on the shoulder. "I got a second chance to be a parent and I almost blow it over something stupid."

"Nonsense," Joyce whacks his shoulder again. "You're doing fine as a parent. What's that thing that Lucas says when he's trying to compliment someone? Oh, I just had it-"

"You're the shit," Hopper laughs, "He says you're the shit."

Joyce snorts, bringing an even bigger smile to Hopper's face. "That's right, that's what he says. Well then, that's what you are at parenting."

"I'm the shit?"

“You’re the shit” Joyce nods, poking him in the shoulder.

Hopper lets out another sigh. “I should probably go talk to the kid. Tell her I didn’t mean it and that she can wear the ring, but on her *right* hand.” Standing up, he ruffles Joyce’s hair and begins to make his way back to El’s room.

“Hey Joyce,” he looks around the corner back at his wife. “You’re the shit, too.”

"All that was taken from me is still here"- Nayyirah
Waheed

Notes for the Chapter:

there! some jopper angst/fluff and little mileven. i've
been holding on to that promise ring head canon for
like eight months now. thank you for reading!
xoxo, ceruleanstorm

5. "the chairs are heavy, but you still can't throw them at people"

Summary for the Chapter:

Will and Eleven spend an afternoon with Hopper at the station.

Notes for the Chapter:

it's me again!!! it's been really fun writing these little ficlets. tell me what you think!

Hopper's first warning should have been the laughter coming from his office. It sounded like they were trying *not* to laugh, snickering every once in awhile and shushing each other loudly, so he wouldn't hear them. He tried ignoring it, figuring they would find something appropriate to do, but laughter continued, and he put down his sandwich in defeat.

"Hey Flo," he called from his office "could you go see what they're doing out there?"

Flo peeked her head into the Chief's office, then she glanced out into the rest of the room. "Oh, nothing. Just kids being kids, I guess."

"Well, what are they doing?" he asked, the term "kids being kids" making him suspicious.

Letting out a long sigh, Flo put her hands on hips. "Hopper, I'm not being paid here to babysit your kids. They're *fine*, but since it's your job to be watching them I suggest checking on them yourself." She smirked, walking away before Hopper could say anything else. They weren't *his* kids exactly; sure he had custody of Eleven until they could work out something better, but he wasn't anything more than a guardian to telekinetic preteen. As for Will, Hopper had agreed to watch him every once in awhile when both Joyce and Jonathan had to work. But they weren't his kids. Hopper went back to his lunch.

His next warning should have been Eleven and Will coming into his

office, still snickering every time they looked at each other, to ask for his desk chairs.

“Why do you need them?” he asked, squinting his eyes.

Eleven gave an innocent shrug that Will mirrored. “Okay, yeah, sure you can have those two over there.”

“Thanks Chief!” Will pumped his fist in the air and began trying to drag one of the chairs away from Hopper’s desk. He tilted it up, in a flustered attempt to make dragging it easier. But it hit the ground with a *thump*, Will sighing.

“Hopper, why are the chairs here so heavy?” Eleven asked.

He didn’t even look up from the report he was in the middle of, telling her outright, “So you can’t throw them at people.”

The laughter started again, and when the Chief looked up, they were looking at him with doubt in their eyes. “Really?” Will intoned, “Why would people be throwing chairs? Does that happen often?”

“We bring criminals in here every day,” Hopper continued to write, taking another bite of his sandwich. “People who are angry that they got detained, so we make sure they can’t throw stuff at the officers. And yes, it happened a couple times, before we got the heavy chairs.”

“Oh.” Will nodded. “Well, thank you for the chairs, Chief.”

Hopper signed his name at the bottom of the report, before placing it in the ever growing pile of them on his desk. “Anytime, kid.”

His third warning came soon after Eleven and Will dragged the chairs away, grunting and panting as the chairs were well half their weight, maybe even combined, when Callahan came into his office. “Hey Chief,” he started, “You don’t have any tape, do you?”

“No, the kids took it awhile ago.” He answered. When they had asked for it earlier, he simply handed the tape roll to them, not giving it any thought.

“Well, I talked to them and they said they were out.” Callahan

shrugged. "They sent me to go look for more."

"Go look for more?" Hopper narrowed his eyes. "Why?"

"For their fort. They built a really big one out here out of chairs and stuff. Flo even gave them blankets, and they've been taping stuff to the walls and-

"They built a what now?" asked Hopper. Callahan was in the process of answering him, but Hopper was already office door.

They had built a fort, way in the back of the office, but it was huge. Desks were empty of chairs that were now stacked on top of each other, covered in sheets and blankets. Other officers, including Powell, were helping to balance the chairs and keep the blankets tucked. Almost no one was at their desks. Eleven was taping something to the outside, Will handing her more tape from within the fort, when she whirled around and saw Hopper.

"Uh oh." she muttered, hitting the blankets so Will would crawl out. When he did, his eyes went wide.

Hopper let out a long sigh. He should've seen this coming; Will had that hide out in the woods, and Eleven had told him about her tiny hideaway in the Wheeler's basement. Together their powers combined, Hopper almost wanted to laugh. His mind went back to a time when he would make couch forts with Sarah.

"Looks good, kids." Hopper winked at Eleven.

"We're not in trouble?" she asked, followed by Will "We don't have to take it down?."

"No, you're not in trouble but you do have to take it down before you leave. And you two owe me a roll of tape. Everybody else," he glanced around the office, eyes narrowing on his officers, specifically Callahan, "get back to work." With that, he walked back into his office. He had a sandwich to finish.

They're good kids, he thought to himself as he sat back down in his office. Part of him wanted to be out there with them because it was nice to see them happy, for once, even if they had wasted all his tape.

But he stayed put at his desk as he did have to finish these reports and he didn't want to endure knowing looks from Flo. The afternoon began to fade away, filled with Eleven and Will's laughter.

"Damn why are these chairs so heavy?" Callahan whined loudly as both Will and Eleven shouted excitedly "So you can't throw them at people!"

"There isn't time- so brief is life- for bickerings, apologies, heartburnings, callings to account. There is only time for loving - and but for an instant, so to speak, for that." - Mark Twain

Notes for the Chapter:

@ the hospital we couldn't carry the chairs (like I'm talking grown men had a hard time dragging them) and we joked that this was why.

6. "to see through the eyes of God"

Summary for the Chapter:

Joyce knows something is wrong with her son. She just doesn't know how to fix it.

Notes for the Chapter:

that trailer tho.

Something is wrong with Will. She knows it- no, she's *certain* of it. It's the same strong instinct that told her to find every lamp in the house and string 40 feet of Christmas lights all over the goddamn house. Something is *wrong*, she can feel it. But she doesn't know how to fix it.

Joyce knows she can't do that by melting into a hysterical mess like she did last time. She needs people to believe her, for Will's sake. But the doctors, his teachers, even Jonathan were consoling her with the same message, attempting to comfort her with "Will is going to be okay. You just have to give him time." But Joyce can't help the sinking feeling that they're running out of time.

Hopper would believe her, but she and Hopper haven't talked in a long time.

Will's *just* different. Of course he's no longer the kid that was biking home that November night a year ago. The doctors whisper about possible post traumatic stress disorder, even one or two of them throw the word "psychosis" around. But of course Will is traumatized- he was in there for a goddamn week, with that *thing*, the countless nightmares, the frequent panic attacks and flashbacks- those all makes *sense*. He doesn't have to hide that from her, the whole reason she's here is to help him through this, someone to come

to when the emotions and memories are too much, and he does come to her.

But there's something he's hiding, Joyce is sure of it. Something beyond the nightmares and anxiety. He runs to the bathroom often, likes he's sick or something. His hands shake constantly, and he doesn't draw as much as he used to. And the drawings he can make himself do, he stuffs them in his desk drawer and jams it, but Joyce finds them anyway. The monster with no face, perfect from memory and crumpled up in rage. A place covered in vines and the darkness of the pencil he was trying to shade with, but just broke. Slugs in bathrooms sinks with a note written over and over and over at the bottom: *"What do you want from me?"*

When she asks about the drawings after she finds them on a rainy Saturday, his eyes go wide and he won't look at her, just mumbles something about a campaign for that game he plays with all his friends. He rips the drawings from her hand, his face dark.

"Why were you in my room?" he asks, almost normal but the hostility is there.

Joyce stutters. She tries to remember that last time Will was angry like this. "I was just looking for-"

"Well don't." he tells her. Joyce watches her baby almost run away from her and all she can do is stand there in a stunned empty silence.

Will starts locking the door to his room after that.

It's a shot in the dark attempt, but Joyce tries talks to Jonathan about later. Jonathan has been there for his brother, driving him places, staying up late to talk him down after a panic attacks, fill his bedside table with mix after mix. So why hasn't *he* noticed?

"He's just at that age, Mom. And he's been through a lot, I'd be angry too." Jonathan tells her with a long sigh.

"He's *locking* his door now for God's sake, he—"

"Well, *why* were you spying mom?" He turns on her on the verge of yelling. Taking a deep breath, he runs a shaky hand through his hair. "Look, Mom, Will, he- he'll be fine. But you have to give him some space, smothering him isn't going to help him."

"Something is *wrong* with him, Jonathan—" Joyce grabs her son's shoulder as he tries to walk away.

"Of course there's something wrong with him!" Jonathan shouts. Joyce takes her hand away, gasping and jumping. But then Jonathan has grabbed her shoulders. He's shaking, hard, and his voice chokes. "He spent a week in *hell*, Mom."

"So you have noticed? Why didn't you say anything?" Joyce gasps.

Jonathan's shoulders slump. "Because I don't know what to do. I

don't know how to help him. He has these moments, when we're talking, where he just disappears. It's like, one minute he's talking and laughing and everything's okay and the next he's in some sort of trance. It's weird, it's like, he doesn't respond to anything I say, not even his name. And then he comes back, and he can't remember anything. He didn't want me to tell you."

"Why- why?" Joyce almost cries, but she steadies her shaking hand. "What else, Jonathan, what else?"

He only shrugs, but she can see him wiping tears away. "He, well, he says he's been seeing things. Things that don't really make any sense. It's scaring him really bad. Look, Mom, you can't tell him that I told you. I promised I wouldn't say anything.

Joyce takes her son's face in her hands. "You *have* to tell me when it happens again. Will can't get better if we don't help him! We have to-'

"Mom!" Jonathan shouts, "what if he just gets better? All he needs is some time-"

"We can't *run* from this! He needs our help Jonathan, so please, say you'll help. Say you'll help get your brother back."

"Okay I will, Mom." he falls into her arms sobbing, as if the weight of the world has been lifted off his shoulders. She holds her son in her arms just like she used to, like all of this was just a scrape or bruise she could heal by being the Mom.

Night falls, and routinely she checks on her sons. This time Will's door is unlocked.

"Will?" she whispers, but he's sound asleep in his bed, looking the calmest she's seen in a long time. She comes and sits on his bed, moving his hair out of his face. Her baby boy.

Joyce isn't aware of how long she sits there. Her mind floats back to when they buried his body- the *fake* body- and the preacher talked of Will's place in heaven. Joyce isn't sure she believed in heaven anymore, or God, not after Lonnie, and being homeless, and watching Hopper pull a snake like alien out of the mouth of her son, but she remembers the preacher saying "At times like these we need to see through the eyes of God. To remember that we're all part of a grand picture we can't see unless we take a step back."

Well this was her taking a step. Trying to see through the eyes of God and to see the whole picture where Will's pain meant something. To see him as something other than a powerless victim.

"Mom?" Will whispers, turning around and seeing her.

"Shh, honey, go back to sleep." She strokes his hair again, and with a deep breath, he's sleeping peacefully once more.

Joyce Byers didn't know why her son was falling to pieces. She only knew that it was her job to pick him back up and put him back together.

Notes for the Chapter:

thank you for reading.
love, savannah

7. "you're the light at the end of the tunnel"

Summary for the Chapter:

Jonathan picks up a camera for the first time.

Notes for the Chapter:

so, yes, I am still working on the second chapter of "devil's in the backseat" and it should be ready soon. But I really like these little one shots so they'll keep coming.

savannah

His dad was drunk again.

Jonathan knew this happened a lot. There were a lot of nights where Lonnie was drunk, because his mom always did the same thing. On regular nights his would come home around two in the afternoon, right when Jonathan got home from the elementary school, relieving Will's babysitter. Then Jonathan would watch Will play and when his dad was in another room (he almost never watched them) Jonathan would play with him. They would have adventures in the living room, hopping from couch cushion to couch cushion because the floor was lava. They would build a fort every day out of pillows and blankets and then they would play in there. Jonathan would draw pictures while Will colored them in. Unlike other little kids, Will was a good colorer and colored in the lines of all his pictures. His classmates in the first grade couldn't do that, so Will was obviously smarter and more special than them.

Then his mom would come home, late, right before Will's bedtime. She would hurry to make the dinner his dad was whining for and then put Will to bed. After that, she would let Jonathan stay up late and they would eat ice cream together. She would tell him about all the people she'd met at work and he would fill her in on what he was learning in school. He went to bed next, and so did his mom, but not before she kissed Will and Jonathan goodnight.

But then there were the nights his dad drank and lumbered onto the living room couch to whine and complain about Jonathan's mom (once, when Jonathan was feeling brave, he told Lonnie to shut up and stop saying those things about his mom, and Lonnie had yelled at him, making both him and Will cry) and when his mom came home that night, he'd start yelling at her with bloodshot eyes and shaking hands. His mom would take Jonathan and Will into Will's room. Then a little while later, she would bring them dinner. She would tuck them into Will's bed and kiss them good night, leaving the door cracked open because Will was scared of the dark. He would tell his little brother, that no, of course he wasn't scared of the dark, they were safe and nothing could hurt him. But as he listened to his mom and dad scream at each other long into the night, he didn't really think so anymore.

His dad was drunk again, but Will had fallen asleep in the afternoon, and was already in his room. "Jonathan," his mom said when she got home, moving him quickly down the hall, "you should go too."

"But, Mom, I don't want to!" she tried to pull him into the room, but Jonathan stood very still and planted his feet. "I want to stay out here, with you. I want to help you."

She knelt down and took his hands hers. "Jonathan, I'll be okay."

"You yell at each other." Jonathan whispered. "It never sounds okay."

"Does it, does it bother you when we yell?" his mom asked and he nodded. Then she was wrapping him in a hug. Jonathan didn't realize it before, but he was crying.

"It'll be okay. Shhh, honey, I'm right here. It'll be alright." she rocked him back and forth as he cried harder. "I have an idea." she whispered, and stood up. He watched her tip toe into the living room, then into the kitchen.

"Come here, Jonathan." he heard her say from the kitchen and he walks carefully through the carpeted hallway to his mom.

"Lonnie's asleep." His mom pointed to the living room. "Do you want to help me make dinner?" Jonathan nodded. His mom is not the best

at cooking, but he perks up when she says it's mac n cheese, his favorite. "Here, could you clean off the table Jonathan? That would help mommy a lot."

He nodded, and began to clear the clutter from their small kitchen table. They never ate at it as a family. Jonathan took all the half empty beer cans and old stained newspapers and put them in trash can. He took all the dirty dishes and put them in the sink. His mom had gotten the water to a boil, asking him if he wanted to pour the noodles in. Then they had to wait, so Jonathan went back to cleaning the table up.

"Hey mom, what's this?" he asked, holding up what he had found for her to see.

She glanced up from the pot. "Oh, oh that's a camera, sweetie."

"Like a camera that takes pictures of people?" he asked, and his mom nodded. "Does this one still work?" he turned the lunky object over on it side, almost dropping it.

"I- I don't know, Jonathan. Here, bring it here, and we'll see if has any film." Her eyes lit up, in a way that Jonathan couldn't remember seeing in a long time. There was the time when Will learned how to walk, but that was before Lonnie started drinking every day. Her eyes were bright every day before then. He brought her the camera and placed it on the counter with an *plop!*

"Did I break it?" Jonathan asked as his mom picked up the camera.

His mom shook her head. "No, but be careful in the future, honey, cameras are very fragile. Do you know what that word means?"

"That it breaks easy." Jonathan whispered. His mom nodded again.

"Well it looks like it's still got some film in there. I don't know what that thing was doing over there, I didn't even know we still had one. Looks like you unburied a treasure! Here, it's almost done."

While his mom drained the pot and started making the cheese to mix in, Jonathan studied the camera. He discovered that if he clicked the button on top, the camera would make a little *click* sound and the

light on top would flash. Then, he found a tiny little window on the camera, and took another picture.

“Be careful Jonathan,” his mother warned him. “You don’t want to burn through your film.”

“Hey, Mom, say cheese!” Jonathan laughed as he took another photo of her. And another. And another.

“Jonathan!” his mom almost dropped the bowl of their dinner. “What are you doing?”

“I’m taking your picture.” he told her, taking another picture.

She put her head in her hands. “Oh, Jonathan, you don’t want to waste your film, taking pictures of-of me!”

“Yes, I do.” Jonathan said. He didn’t understand why she didn’t want to have her picture taken. “You’re my mom.”

“Oh, Jonathan.” his mom was crying, so Jonathan rushed to put the camera back on the table.

“Mom, what’s wrong?”

That’s when she pulled him to sit on her lap and hugged him tightly. “You’re the light at the end of the tunnel, you know that?”

“What does that mean?” he asked, his head nuzzled on his mom’s shoulder.

“It means you make everything worth it, all the bad and good things, in the end. I love you, Jonathan. Don’t you ever forget that.”

“I won’t. I love you too, Mom. Can I keep the camera?”

“Of course, Jonathan.” she smiled, and her eyes were full of light again.

Notes for the Chapter:

tell me what you think! thanks for reading! coming

up next in the series is something really mileven.

8. "you're always welcome to one of my formals"

Summary for the Chapter:

Eleven gets too sick to attend junior prom and Mike comes to the rescue.

Notes for the Chapter:

so because I was in the hospital, I missed my senior prom. I hadn't gone to my junior one because I'd thought I would just go to the senior one. but then I got sick.

The good news is that I got to spend that night with my dog, and I had this cute idea for Mike and Eleven.

"Are you sure you want us to go without you?" Dustin asks her again, and Lucas and Will nod in agreement. They're all dressed up in their tuxedos, standing in her doorway, each holding a tiny box. El has to admit, her friends clean up nice.

El sneezes again, and a book flies off one of her many bookshelves Hopper's built for her. "I'm sure." She answers with a groggy voice that sends her into a coughing fit. "You guys go. You shouldn't have to stay just because of me."

"El, seriously, we're cool with staying." Lucas tells her. "I can call Stacy and we can stay here and watch a movie or something."

"Go. This way I don't get anyone sick." El insists, and the boys all try one more time to convince her. But she has her mind made up, and soon the boys are off, to join their pretty dates at the dance of the year.

El had been planning this night for months. Sure, it was only *junior* prom, but El fell in love with the idea of it. Not only had she saved enough money for the perfect dress, but for a makeup appointment, and dinner at Mike's favorite restaurant. She payed for her own ticket

(that'd had been a battle). Mike made a huge deal about asking her, and of course she said yes. Every minute of the night was planned. And the morning of the dance El woke up vomiting, with a 104 degree fever and the worst headache of her life.

She tried to call to tell Mike that the night was off, but it was Nancy who had answered the phone.

"You're sick?" Nancy had asked. "Oh, El I'm so sorry. I know you were really looking forward to this. I'll tell Mike for you."

"Do you think he'll be disappointed?" El asks, fear dripping out of her voice.

"Maybe, but he'll just mostly be worried about you. This is Mike we're talking about, so, you know. But you shouldn't worry about it El. My sorority hosts all these formals, and you two are always welcome to drive up and come to one of those. Besides, prom is lame. It's whole lot of talk for a night that just sucks." Nancy tried reassuring her. Hopper and Joyce had tried a similar route: she could always go next year, she probably wouldn't have any fun there anyway. Will and the other boys agreed. The music would suck, the punch would be spiked, and the theme would be stupid. But Prom was one of the normal high school experiences that El wanted so badly to have. To others it was just a dance, but to her it was a moment of normalcy. She'd put a lot of hope into what was supposed to be a magical night, and it had shattered right in front of her.

When Mike didn't show up with Lucas and Dustin that night, El assumes Nancy delivered her message. She blinks away tears at the thought of disappointing him. He was doing everything he could to make sure she was having those normal experiences she'd been deprived of in the past, but even he couldn't prevent this. She didn't deserve him, and now she's hurt him.

El throws the wadded up tissues onto the gathering pile of them on the floor, groaning. Her sinuses were killing her. Everything was. Every muscle ached and her stomach was in knots. Closing her eyes, she ignores the pain and lays down on her bed, focusing on sleep.

Maybe if she can sleep some of the pain would fade, and her disappointment would be gone.

Tap, tap, tap!

“What?” she groans, not bothering to open her eyes.

Tap, tap, tap!

“Go away!” El yells, shoving her head under her pillow. She has no desire to talk to *anyone* right now or hear about their sucky prom experiences that are supposed to make her feel better.

Tap, tap, tap!

“I said go away!” she yells from under her pillow, wincing at the pain erupting in her head.

“That’s not happening, Eleven!” shouts a muffled voice. El shoots up, looking at her door, then she hears the tapping again and realizes that it’s not coming from her door. It’s coming from her window. “El, can you let me in?”

“Mike?” her eyes go wide and despite the pain *everywhere* El runs to the window. Sure enough, Mike is staring at her from the other side, dressed in a tuxedo and holding a grocery bag. He waves at her, and she melts a little inside.

She opens the window and he crawls through at little ungracefully, falling on the floor and cursing. “What are you doing here?” El asks, helping him up.

“Well since it’s prom night and you’re sick, I thought I’d spend the night with you. Don’t have anywhere else to go.” Mike opens the grocery bag and pulls out a tub of mint chocolate chip ice cream- her favorite, and two spoons. He’s wearing a smile so big, she’s reminded of the boy she met on the first day, ecstatically showing her around his house. All Eleven wants to do his hug him, but she makes herself small and she pulls Mike onto the bed with her. “What is it with us and school dances?”

“I guess we’re just bad at them.” El laughs, wiping away tears. “You

didn't have to wear a tux."

He shrugs. "Well, we went through the whole process of renting one, so I didn't want to see it wasted." El feels severely underdressed in her sweats, but part of the night's disappointment has been erased now that she's gotten to see her boyfriend in a tuxedo.

Mike hands El a spoon and snuggles up to her. El takes him in, in the dark shadow of her rooms, as they share the ice cream. He doesn't say much, just holds her and laughs when she sneezes.

"What?" he protests "I think it's cute."

"Well if that's cute the rest of me right now is probably gorgeous." she smirks, shaking her head.

He pushes a piece of her hair behind her ear. "You're always beautiful, El." He says it with so little hesitation, like it's the most simple thing in the world, but to her it's everything.

"Here," he stands up and takes her by the hand. "can I have this dance?"

"What dance?" El looks at him. He spins around her room frantically before finding her stereo. What plays is Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet Suite*. Not exactly the most romantic piece of music.

"You listen to classical music?" he asks her as she takes his hand.

"To get to sleep at night, yes."

"It's a little dramatic." he laughs, spinning her around the room. "The little things I learn about you everyday."

"We can dance to something else." El tells him and he shakes his head.

"No this fine. What else would you prefer, Africa by Toto?"

El leans her head in on his shoulder as they start to sway. His hands come to rest on her waist and she pulls him in closer. "I hope I don't get you sick." she whispers. The music changes to something softer as

their foreheads connect.

“It’d be worth it.”

They continue to sway with the soft music, and time fades away around them. He doesn’t know how long he stands there holding her, she doesn’t know how but some of the pain is gone. Quiet, in a whisper he almost misses, she mutters “I love you.”

It’s the first time she’s ever said it. But Mike doesn’t even hesitate or even miss a beat. “I love you too.”

This, El thinks to herself as she smiles into his shoulder, is so much better than prom.

"There's no hiding from your soulmate: they will find you, you will fall, and they will stay." -*faraway*

Notes for the Chapter:

as always, tell me what you think!

Author's Note:

thanks for reading loves, I missed you xoxo-
ceruleanstorm